

Veneration of the dead

The **veneration of the dead**, including one's ancestors, is based on love and respect for the deceased. In some cultures, it is related to beliefs that the dead have a continued existence, and may possess the ability to influence the fortune of the living. Some groups venerate their direct, familial ancestors. Certain sects and religions, in particular the Eastern Orthodox Church and Roman Catholic Church, venerate saints as intercessors with God; the latter also believes in prayer for departed souls in Purgatory. Other religious groups, however, consider veneration of the dead to be idolatry and a sin.

In European, Asian, Oceanian, African and Afro-diasporic cultures, the goal of ancestor veneration is to ensure the ancestors' continued well-being and positive disposition towards the living, and sometimes to ask for special favours or assistance. The social or non-religious function of ancestor veneration is to cultivate kinship values, such as filial piety, family loyalty, and continuity of the family lineage. Ancestor veneration occurs in societies with every degree of social, political, and technological complexity, and it remains an important component of various religious practices in modern times.

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Overview

Ancestor reverence is not the same as the worship of a deity or deities. In some Afro-diasporic cultures, ancestors are seen as being able to intercede on behalf of the living, often as messengers between humans and God. As spirits who were once human themselves, they are seen as being better able to understand human needs than would a divine being. In other cultures, the purpose of ancestor veneration is not to ask for favors but to do one's filial duty. Some cultures believe that their ancestors actually need to be provided for by their descendants, and their practices include offerings of food and other provisions. Others do not believe that the ancestors are even aware of what their descendants do for them, but that the expression of filial piety is what is important.

Most cultures who practice ancestor veneration do not call it "ancestor worship". In English, the word *worship* usually but not always refers to the reverent love and devotion accorded a deity (god) or God.^{[1][2][3]} However, in other cultures, this act of worship does not confer any belief that the departed ancestors have become some kind of deity. Rather, the act is a way to express filial duty, devotion and respect and look after ancestors in their afterlives as well as seek their guidance for their living descendants. In this regard, many cultures and religions have similar practices. Some may visit the graves of their parents or other ancestors, leave flowers and pray to them in order to honor and remember them, while also asking their ancestors to continue to look after them. However, this would not be considered as worshipping them since the term *worship* may not always convey such meaning in the exclusive and narrow context of certain Western European Christian traditions.

In that sense the phrase *ancestor veneration* may but from the limited perspective of certain Western European Christian traditions, convey a more accurate sense of what practitioners, such as the Chinese and other Buddhist-influenced and Confucian-influenced societies, as well as the African and European cultures see themselves as doing. This is consistent with the meaning of the word *veneration* in English, that is great respect or reverence caused by the dignity, wisdom, or dedication of a person.^{[4][5][6]}

Although there is no generally accepted theory concerning the origins of ancestor veneration, this social phenomenon appears in some form in all human cultures documented so far. David-Barrett and Carney claim that ancestor veneration might have served a group coordination role during human evolution,^[7] and thus it was the mechanism that led to religious representation fostering group cohesion.^{[8][9]}

West and Southeast African cultures

Ancestor veneration is prevalent throughout Africa, and serves as the basis of many religions. It is often augmented by a belief in a supreme being, but prayers and/or sacrifices are usually offered to the ancestors who may ascend to becoming a kind of minor deities themselves. Ancestor veneration remains among many Africans, sometimes practiced alongside the later adopted religions of Christianity (as in Nigeria

among the Igbo people), and Islam (among the different Mandé peoples and the Bamum and the Bakossi people) in much of the continent.^{[10][11]} In orthodox Serer religion, the pangool is venerated by the Serer people.

Serer of Senegal and Gambia

The Seereer people of Senegal, The Gambia and Mauritania who adhere to the tenets of A fat Roog (Seereer religion) believe in the veneration of the pangool (ancient Seereer saints and/or ancestral spirits). There are various types of pangool (singular: *fangol*), each with its own means of veneration.

Madagascar

Veneration of ancestors is prevalent throughout the island of Madagascar. Approximately half of the country's population of 20 million currently practice traditional religion,^[12] which tends to emphasize links between the living and the *razana* (ancestors). The veneration of ancestors has led to the widespread tradition of tomb building, as well as the highlands practice of the *famadihana*, whereby a deceased family member's remains may be exhumed to be periodically re-wrapped in fresh silk shrouds before being replaced in the tomb. The famadihana is an occasion to celebrate the beloved ancestor's memory, reunite with family and community, and enjoy a festive atmosphere. Residents of surrounding villages are often invited to attend the party, where food and rum are typically served and a hiragasy troupe or other musical entertainment is commonly present.^[13] Veneration of ancestors is also demonstrated through adherence to *fady*, taboos that are respected during and after the lifetime of the person who establishes them. It is widely believed that by showing respect for ancestors in these ways, they may intervene on behalf of the living. Conversely, misfortunes are often attributed to ancestors whose memory or wishes have been neglected. The sacrifice of zebu is a traditional method used to appease or honor the ancestors. Small, everyday gestures of respect include throwing the first capful of a newly opened bottle of rum into the northeast corner of the room to give the ancestors their due share.^[14]



Famadihana reburial ceremony

Asian cultures

Cambodia

During Pchum Ben and the Cambodian New Year people make offerings to their ancestors. Pchum Ben is a time when many Cambodians pay their respects to deceased relatives of up to seven generations.^[15] Monks chant the suttas in Pali language overnight (continuously, without sleeping) in prelude to the gates of hell opening, an event that is presumed to occur once a year, and is linked to the cosmology of King Yama originating in the Pali Canon. During this period, the gates of hell are opened and ghosts of the dead (*preta*) are presumed to be especially active. In order to combat this, food-offerings are made to benefit them, some of these ghosts having the opportunity to end their period of purgation, whereas others are imagined to leave hell temporarily, to then return to endure more suffering; without much explanation, relatives who are not in hell (who are in heaven or otherwise reincarnated) are also generally imagined to benefit from the ceremonies.

China

In China, ancestor veneration (敬祖, pinyin: jìngzǔ) and ancestor worship (拜祖, pinyin: bàizǔ) seek to honour and recollect the actions of the deceased; they represent the ultimate homage to the dead. The importance of paying respect to parents (and elders) lies with the fact that all physical bodily aspects of one's being were created by one's parents, who continued to tend to one's well-being until one was on firm footing. The respect and homage to parents is to return this gracious deed to them in life and after. The shi (尸; "corpse, personator") was a Zhou dynasty (1045–256 BCE) sacrificial representative of a dead relative. During a shi ceremony, the ancestral spirit supposedly would enter the personator, who would eat and drink sacrificial offerings and convey spiritual messages.



Burning of incense during a veneration at Mengjia Longshan Temple, which is dedicated to Guan Yu, Mazu, and others

Sacrifices



Burning offerings

In traditional Chinese culture, sacrifices are sometimes made to altars as food for the deceased. This falls under the modes of communication with the Chinese spiritual world concepts. Some of the veneration includes visiting the deceased at their graves, and making or buying offerings for the deceased in the Spring, Autumn, and Ghost Festivals. Due to the hardships of the late 19th- and 20th-century China, when meat and poultry were difficult to come by, sumptuous feasts are still offered in some Asian countries as a practice to the spirits or ancestors. However, in the orthodox Taoist and Buddhist rituals, only vegetarian food would suffice. For those with deceased in the afterlife or hell, elaborate or even creative offerings, such as servants, refrigerators, houses, car, paper money and shoes are provided so that the deceased will be able to have these items after they have died. Often, paper versions of these objects are burned for the same purpose. Originally, real-life objects were buried with the dead. In time these goods were replaced by full size clay models which in turn were replaced by scale models, and in time today's paper offerings (including paper servants).

India

Ancestors are widely revered, honoured, and venerated in India and China. The spirit of a dead person is called Pitrs, which is venerated. When a person dies, the family observes a thirteen-day mourning period, generally called śrāddha. A year thence, they observe the ritual of Tarpan, in which the family makes offerings to the deceased. During these rituals, the family prepares the food items that the deceased liked and offers food to the deceased. They offer this food to crows as well on certain days as it is believed that the soul comes in the form of a bird to taste it. They are also obliged to offer śrāddha, a small feast of specific preparations, to eligible Brahmins. Only after these rituals are the family members allowed to eat. It is believed that this reminds the ancestor's spirits that they are not forgotten and are loved, so it brings them peace. On Shradh days, people pray that the souls of ancestors be appeased, forget any animosity and find peace. Each year, on the particular date (as per the Hindu calendar) when the person had died, the family members repeat this ritual.

Indian and Chinese practices of ancestor-worship are prevalent throughout Asia as a result of the large Indian and Chinese populations in countries such as Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, and elsewhere across the continent. Furthermore, the large Indian population in places such as Fiji and Guyana has resulted in



Shraadhha taking place at Jagannath Ghat in Calcutta, at end of *Pitru Paksha*.

these practices spreading beyond their Asian homeland.

Assam

The *Ahom religion* is based on ancestor-worship. The Ahoms believe that a man after his death remains as 'Dam'(ancestor) only for a few days and soon he becomes 'Phi' (God). They also believe that the soul of a man which is immortal unites with the supreme soul, possesses the qualities of a spiritual being and always blesses the family. So every Ahom family in order to worship the dead establish a pillar on the opposite side of the kitchen (Barghar) which is called 'Damkhuta' where they worship the dead with various offerings like homemade wine, mah-prasad, rice with various items of meat and fish. Me-Dam-Me-Phi, a ritual centred on commemorating the dead, is celebrated by the *Ahom people* on 31 January every year in memory of the



Mae Dam Mae Phi celebrations in Assam, India.

departed. It is the manifestation of the concept of ancestor worship that the Ahoms share with other peoples originating from the Tai-Shan stock. It is a festival to show respect to the departed ancestors and remember their contribution to society. On the day of Me-Dam Me Phi worship is offered only to Chaufi and Dam Chaufi because they are regarded as gods of heaven.

Indus Valley Civilization

At *Rakhigarhi*, an *Indus Valley Civilization* (IVC) site in *Haryana*, the lover's skeletons of a man between 35 and 40 years old and women in early 20s were found who were likely married to each other and buried together, their grave contained pots which likely carried food and water as offering to the dead.^{[16][17]}

Paliya in Gujarat

The *Paliya* memorial stones are associated with ancestral worship in western India. These memorials are worshiped by people of associated community or decedents of a person on special days such as death day of person, event anniversaries, festivals, auspicious days in Kartika, *Shraavana* or *Bhadrapada* months of *Hindu calendar*. These memorials are washed with milk and water on these days. They are smeared with *sindoor* or *kumkum* and flowers are scattered over it. The *earthen lamp* is lighted near it with sesame oil. Sometimes a flag is erected over it.^[18]



Four *Paliyas*, one dedicated to man and three to women at Chhatardi, *Bhuj*, *Kutch*, Gujarat, India

Pitru Paksha in Indian-origin religions

Apart from this, there is also a fortnight-long duration each year called *Pitru Paksha* ("fortnight of ancestors"), when the family remembers all its ancestors and offers "Tarpan" to them.^[19] This period falls just before the *Navratri* or *Durga Puja* falling in the month of *Ashwin*. *Mahalaya* marks the end of the fortnight-long Tarpan to the ancestors.^[20]

Tuluva Culture in Tulu Nadu

Tuluvas have the ancestor worship in the name of Buta Kola.

Indonesia

In Indonesia ancestor worship has been a tradition of some of the indigenous people. Podom of the Toba Batak, Waruga of the Minahasans and the coffins of the Karo people (Indonesia) are a few examples of the forms the veneration takes.

Japan

Before the introduction of Buddhism to Japan, ancestor worship and funerary rites were not common, especially for non-elites.^[21] In the Heian Period, abandonment was a common method of disposing of the dead.^[22] Following the advent of Buddhism, rituals were sometimes performed at the gravesite after burial or cremation.^[23]

Korea

In Korea, ancestor veneration is referred to by the generic term jerye (hangul: 제례; hanja: 祭禮) or jesa (hangul: 제사; hanja: 祭祀). Notable examples of jerye include Munmyo jerye and Jongmyo jerye, which are performed periodically each year for venerated Confucian scholars and kings of ancient times, respectively. The ceremony held on the anniversary of a family member's death is called charye (차례). It is still practiced today.^[24]

The majority of Catholics, Buddhists and nonbelievers practice ancestral rites, although Protestants do not.^[25] The Catholic ban on ancestral rituals was lifted in 1939, when the Catholic Church formally recognized ancestral rites as a civil practice.^[25]



A Korean jesa altar for ancestors

Ancestral rites are typically divided into three categories:^[26]

1. Charye (차례, 茶禮) – tea rites held four times a year on major holidays (Korean New Year, Chuseok)
2. Kije (기제, 忌祭) – household rites held the night before an ancestor's death anniversary (기일, 忌日)
3. Sije (시제, 時祭; also called 사시제 or 四時祭) – seasonal rites held for ancestors who are five or more generations removed (typically performed annually on the tenth lunar month)

Myanmar

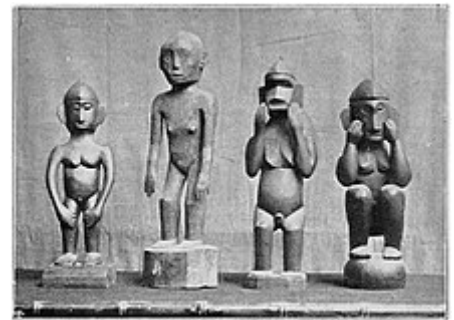
Ancestor worship in modern-day Myanmar is largely confined to some ethnic minority communities, but mainstream remnants of it still exist, such as worship of Bo Bo Gyi (literally "great grandfather"), as well as of other guardian spirits such as nats, all of which may be vestiges of historic ancestor worship.^[27]

Ancestor worship was present in the royal court in pre-colonial Burma. During the Konbaung dynasty, solid gold images of deceased kings and their consorts were worshiped three times a year by the royal family, during the Burmese New Year (*Thingyan*), at the beginning and at the end of Vassa.^[28] The images were stored in the treasury and worshiped at the Zetawunzaung (ဧတဝုန်ဆောင်, "Hall of Ancestors"), along with a book of odes.^[28]

Some scholars attribute the disappearance of ancestor worship to the influence of Buddhist doctrines of anicca and anatta, impermanence and rejection of a 'self'.^[29]

Philippines

In the animistic indigenous religions of the precolonial Philippines, ancestor spirits were one of the two major types of spirits (*anito*) with whom shamans communicate. Ancestor spirits were known as *umalagad* (lit. "guardian" or "caretaker"). They can be the spirits of actual ancestors or generalized guardian spirits of a family. Ancient Filipinos believed that upon death, the soul of a person travels (usually by boat) to a spirit world.^{[30][31][32]} There can be multiple locations in the spirit world, varying in different ethnic groups. Which place souls end up in depends on how they died, the age at death, or conduct of the person when they were alive. Souls reunite with deceased relatives in the underworld and lead normal lives in the underworld as they did in the material world. In some cases, the souls of evil people undergo penance and cleansing before they are granted entrance into a particular spirit realm. Souls would eventually reincarnate after a period of time in the spirit world.^{[30][31][33][34]}



Various Igorot *bulul* depicting *anito* or ancestor spirits (c. 1900)

Souls in the spirit world still retain a degree of influence in the material world, and vice versa. *Paganito* rituals may be used to invoke good ancestor spirits for protection, intercession, or advice. Vengeful spirits of the dead can manifest as apparitions or ghosts (*mantiw*) and cause harm to living people. *Paganito* can be used to appease or banish them.^{[30][33][35]} Ancestor spirits also figured prominently during illness or death, as they were believed to be the ones who call the soul to the underworld, guide the soul (a psychopomp), or meet the soul upon arrival.^[30]

Ancestor spirits are also known as *kalading* among the Cordillerans;^[36] *tonong* among the Maguindanao and Maranao;^[37] *umboh* among the Sama-Bajau;^[38] *ninunò* among Tagalogs; and *nono* among Bicolanos.^[39] Ancestor spirits are usually represented by carved figures called *taotao*. These were carved by the community upon a person's death. Every household had a *taotao* stored in a shelf in the corner of the house.^[30]

The predominantly Roman Catholic Filipino people still hold ancestors in particular esteem—though without the formality common to their neighbours—despite having been Christianised since coming into contact with Spanish missionaries in 1521. In the present day, ancestor veneration is expressed in having photographs of the dead by the home altar, a common fixture in many Filipino Christian homes. Candles are often kept burning before the photographs, which are sometimes decorated with garlands of fresh *sampaguita*, the national flower. Ancestors, particularly dead parents, are still regarded as psychopomps, as a dying person is said to be brought to the afterlife (Tagalog: *sundô*, "fetch") by the spirits of dead relatives. It is said that when the dying call out the names of deceased loved ones, they can see the spirits of those particular people waiting at the foot of the deathbed.

Filipino Catholic and Aglipayan veneration of the dead finds its greatest expression in the Philippines is the Hallowmas season between 31 October and 2 November, variously called *Undás* (based on the word for "[the] first", the Spanish *andas* or possibly *honra*), *Todos los Santos* (literally "All Saints"), and sometimes *Áraw ng mga Patáy* (lit. "Day of the Dead"), which refers to the following solemnity of All Souls' Day. Filipinos traditionally observe this day by visiting the family dead, cleaning and repairing their tombs. Common offerings are prayers, flowers, candles, and even food, while many also spend the remainder of the day and ensuing night holding reunions at the graveyard, playing games and music or singing.

Chinese Filipinos, meanwhile, have the most apparent and distinct customs related to ancestor veneration, carried over from traditional Chinese religion and most often melded with their current Catholic faith. Many still burn incense and kim at family tombs and before photos at home, while they incorporate Chinese practises into Masses held during the All Souls' Day period.

Sri Lanka

In Sri Lanka, making offerings to one's ancestors is conducted on the sixth day after death as a part of traditional Sri Lankan funeral rites.^[40]

Thailand

In rural northern Thailand, a religious ceremony honoring ancestral spirits known as *Faun Phii* (Thai: ฟ้าผี, lit. "spirit dance" or "ghost dance") takes place. It includes offerings for ancestors with spirit mediums sword fighting, spirit-possessed dancing, and spirit mediums cock fighting in a spiritual cockfight.^[41]

Vietnam

Ancestor veneration is one of the most unifying aspects of Vietnamese culture, as practically all Vietnamese, regardless of religious affiliation (Buddhist, Catholic or animist) have an ancestor altar in their home or business.

In Vietnam, traditionally people did not celebrate birthdays (before Western influence), but the death anniversary of one's loved one was always an important occasion. Besides an essential gathering of family members for a banquet in memory of the deceased, incense sticks are burned along with hell notes, and great platters of food are made as offerings on the ancestor altar, which usually has pictures or plaques with the names of the deceased. In the case of missing persons, believed to be dead by their family, a Wind tomb is made.

These offerings and practices are done frequently during important traditional or religious celebrations, the starting of a new business, or even when a family member needs guidance or counsel and is a hallmark of the emphasis Vietnamese culture places on filial duty.

A significant distinguishing feature of Vietnamese ancestor veneration is that women have traditionally been allowed to participate and co-officiate ancestral rites, unlike in Chinese Confucian doctrine, which allows only male descendants to perform such rites.^[42]



A Vietnamese altar for ancestors.
Note smaller Buddhist altar set higher in the upper corner

European cultures

In Catholic countries in Europe (continued later with the Anglican Church in England), November 1 (All Saints' Day), became known and is still known as the day to specifically venerate those who have died, and who have been deemed official saints by the Church. November 2, (All Souls Day), or "The Day of the Dead", is the day when all of the faithful dead are remembered. On that day, families go to cemeteries to light candles for their dead relatives, leave them flowers, and often to picnic. The evening before All Saints—"All Hallows Eve" or "Hallowe'en"—is unofficially the Catholic day to remember the realities of Hell, to mourn the souls lost to evil, and to remember ways to avoid Hell. It is commonly celebrated in the United States and parts of the United Kingdom in a spirit of light-hearted horror and fear, which is marked by the recounting of ghost stories, bonfires, wearing costumes, carving jack-o'-lanterns, and "trick-or-treating" (going door to door and begging for candy).



An old man in traditional dress on the occasion of New Year offering



A scenic cemetery in rural Spain.

Brythonic Celtic cultures

In Cornwall and Wales, the autumn ancestor festivals occur around Nov. 1. In Cornwall the festival is known as Kalan Gwav, and in Wales as Calan Gaeaf.^[43] The festivals are from which modern Halloween is derived.^[43]

Gaelic Celtic cultures

During Samhain, November 1 in Ireland and Scotland, the dead are thought to return to the world of the living, and offerings of food and light are left for them.^[44] On the festival day, ancient people would extinguish the hearth fires in their homes, participate in a community bonfire festival, and then carry a flame home from the communal fire and use it light their home fires anew.^[45] This custom has continued to some extent into modern times, in both the Celtic nations and the diaspora.^[46] Lights in the window to guide the dead home are left burning all night.^[44] On the Isle of Man the festival is known as "old Sauin" or Hop-tu-Naa.^[47]

North America

In the United States and Canada, flowers, wreaths, grave decorations and sometimes candles, food, small pebbles, or items the dead valued in life are put on graves year-round as a way to honor the dead. These traditions originate in the diverse cultural backgrounds of the current populations of both countries. In the United States, many people honor deceased loved ones who were in the military on Memorial Day. Days with religious and spiritual significance like Easter, Christmas, Candlemas, and All Souls' Day, Day of the Dead, or Samhain are also times when relatives and friends of the deceased may gather at the graves of their loved ones. In the Catholic Church, one's local parish church often offers prayers for the dead on their death anniversary or All Souls' Day.

In the United States, Memorial Day is a Federal holiday for remembering the deceased men and women who served in the nation's military, particularly those who died in war or during active service. In the 147 National Cemeteries, like Arlington and Gettysburg, it is common for volunteers to place small American

flags at each grave. Memorial Day is traditionally observed on the last Monday in May, allotting for a 3-day weekend in which many memorial services and parades take place not only across the country, but in 26 American cemeteries on foreign soil (in France, Belgium, the United Kingdom, the Philippines, Panama, Italy, Luxembourg, Mexico, Netherlands, and Tunisia). It is also common practice among veterans to memorialize fallen service members on the dates of their death. This practice is also common in other countries when remembering Americans who died in battles to liberate their towns in the World Wars. One example of this is on 16 August (1944) Colonel Griffith, died of wounds from enemy action sustained in Lèves, the same day he is credited with saving Chartres Cathedral from destruction.

In Judaism, when a grave site is visited, a small pebble is placed on the headstone. While there is no clear answer as to why, this custom of leaving pebbles may date back to biblical days when individuals were buried under piles of stones. Today, they are left as tokens that people have been there to visit and to remember.^[48]

Americans of various religions and cultures may build a shrine in their home dedicated to loved ones who have died, with pictures of their ancestors, flowers and mementos. Increasingly, many roadside shrines may be seen for deceased relatives who died in car accidents or were killed on that spot, sometimes financed by the state or province as these markers serve as potent reminders to drive cautiously in hazardous areas. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., is particularly known for the leaving of offerings to the deceased; items left are collected by the National Park Service and archived.



Ofrenda in Tequisquiapan, Mexico

Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints perform posthumous baptisms and other rituals for their dead ancestors, along with those of other families.

Native Americans were not heavily concerned with the veneration of the dead, though they were known to bury the dead with clothes and tools as well as occasionally leave food and drink at the gravesite; Pueblo Indians supported a cult of the dead which worshipped or petitioned the dead through ritualistic dances.^[49]

Islam

Islam has a complex and mixed view on the idea of grave shrines and ancestor worship. The graves of many early Islamic figures are holy sites for Muslims, including Ali, and a cemetery with many companions and early caliphs. Many other mausoleums are major architectural, political, and cultural sites, including the National Mausoleum in Pakistan and the Taj Mahal in India. However, the religious movement of Wahhabism disputes the concept of saint veneration.^[50] Followers of this movement have destroyed many gravesite shrines, including in Saudi Arabia and in territory controlled by the Islamic State, though it was the teaching of prophet to visit graves and practice of followers to visit the holy shrine of prophet and supplicate there.

Iman Ahmad, Al-Hakim, and others narrated about Marwan Ibn al-Hakam—an unjust ruler—that he once passed by the grave of the Prophet and saw a man with his cheek on the grave of the Prophet. Marwan Ibn al-Hakam asked: “Do you know what you are doing?” Nearing the grave, Marwan Ibn al-Hakam realized it was Abu Ayyub al-Ansariyy, one of the greatest companions of the Prophet. Abu Ayyub al-Ansariyy replied, “Yes, I know what I am doing. I came here for the Messenger of Allah—not for the stone.” By this he meant he was seeking the blessings from the presence of the Prophet, not for the stone covering his grave. Abu Ayyub al-Ansariyy continued his response with what he heard the Messenger of Allah say:

“Do not cry over the Religion of Islam if the rulers are ruling correctly. Rather, cry over this Religion if the rulers are ruling incorrectly.” By his response, Abu Ayyub was telling Marwan Ibn al-Hakam: “You are not one of those rulers who are correctly ruling by the rules of Islam.”

Some followers of Islam are at odds with the concept of saint veneration, but this practice is retained in Turkey, particularly through Alevi Muslims.^[50]

Ancient cultures

Ancestor worship was a prominent feature of many historical societies.

Ancient Egypt

Although some historians claim that ancient Egyptian society was a "death cult" because of its elaborate tombs and mummification rituals, it was the opposite. The philosophy that "this world is but a vale of tears" and that to die and be with God is a better existence than an earthly one was relatively unknown among the ancient Egyptians. This was not to say that they were unacquainted with the harshness of life; rather, their ethos included a sense of continuity between this life and the next. The Egyptian people loved the culture, customs and religion of their daily lives so much that they wanted to continue them in the next—although some might hope for a better station in the Beautiful West (Egyptian afterlife).

Tombs were housing in the Hereafter and so they were carefully constructed and decorated, just as homes for the living were. Mummification was a way to preserve the corpse so the *ka* (soul) of the deceased could return to receive offerings of the things s/he enjoyed while alive. If mummification was not affordable, a "ka-statue" in the likeness of the deceased was carved for this purpose. The Blessed Dead were collectively called the *akh*, or "shining ones" (singular: *akh*). They were described as "shining as gold in the belly of Nut" (Gr. Nuit) and were indeed depicted as golden stars on the roofs of many tombs and temples.

The process by which a *ka* became an *akh* was not automatic upon death; it involved a 70-day journey through the *duat*, or Otherworld, which led to judgment before Wesir (Gr. Osiris), Lord of the Dead where the *ka*'s heart would be weighed on a scale against the Feather of Ma'at (representing Truth). However, if the *ka* was not properly prepared, this journey could be fraught with dangerous pitfalls and strange demons; hence some of the earliest religious texts discovered, such as the Papyrus of Ani (commonly known as The Book of the Dead) and the Pyramid Texts were actually written as guides to help the deceased successfully navigate the *duat*.

If the heart was in balance with the Feather of Ma'at, the *ka* passed judgment and was granted access to the Beautiful West as an *akh* who was *ma'a heru* ("true of voice") to dwell among the gods and other *akh*. At this point only was the *ka* deemed worthy to be venerated by the living through rites and offerings. Those who became lost in the *duat* or deliberately tried to avoid judgment became the unfortunate (and sometimes dangerous) *mutu*, the Restless Dead. For the few whose truly evil hearts outweighed the Feather, the goddess Ammit waited patiently behind Wesir's judgment seat to consume them. She was a composite creature resembling three of the deadliest animals in Egypt: the crocodile, the hippopotamus and the lion. Being fed to Ammit was to be consigned to the Eternal Void, to be "unmade" as a *ka*.

Besides being eaten by Ammit, the worst fate a *ka* could suffer after physical death was to be forgotten. For this reason, ancestor veneration in ancient Egypt was an important rite of remembrance in order to keep the *ka* "alive" in this life as well as in the next. Royals, nobles and the wealthy made contracts with their local priests to perform prayers and give offerings at their tombs. In return, the priests were allowed to keep a portion of the offerings as payment for services rendered. Some tomb inscriptions even invited passers-by

to speak aloud the names of the deceased within (which also helped to perpetuate their memory), and to offer water, prayers or other things if they so desired. In the private homes of the less wealthy, niches were carved into the walls for the purpose of housing images of familial *akhu* and to serve as altars of veneration.

Many of these same religious beliefs and ancestor veneration practices are still carried on today in the religion of Kemetic Orthodoxy.

Ancient Rome

The Romans, like many Mediterranean societies, regarded the bodies of the dead as polluting.^[51] During Rome's Classical period, the body was most often cremated, and the ashes placed in a tomb outside the city walls. Much of the month of February was devoted to purifications, propitiation, and veneration of the dead, especially at the nine-day festival of the Parentalia during which a family honored its ancestors. The family visited the cemetery and shared cake and wine, both in the form of offerings to the dead and as a meal among themselves. The Parentalia drew to a close on February 21 with the more somber Feralia, a public festival of sacrifices and offerings to the Manes, the potentially malevolent spirits of the dead who required propitiation.^[52] One of the most common inscriptional phrases on Latin epitaphs is *Dis Manibus*, abbreviated *D.M.*, "for the Manes gods", which appears even on some Christian tombstones. The Caristia on February 22 was a celebration of the family line as it continued into the present.^[53]



Detail from an early second-century Roman sarcophagus depicting the death of Meleager

A noble Roman family displayed ancestral images (*imagines*) in the tablinium of their home (*domus*). Some sources indicate these portraits were busts, while others suggest that funeral masks were also displayed. The masks, probably modeled of wax from the face of the deceased, were part of the funeral procession when an elite Roman died. Professional mourners wore the masks and regalia of the dead person's ancestors as the body was carried from the home, through the streets, and to its final resting place.^[54]

See also

- Anito
- Ásatrú
- Chinese ancestral worship
- Chinese ancestral hall & Ancestral tablet
- Chinese folk religion
- Chinese rites controversy
- Communion of saints
- Death anniversary
- Funerary art
- Funerary cult
- Haus Tambaran
- Ifá
- Molieben
- Bon Festival
- Qingming Festival

- Shamanism
- Transfer of merit
- Ullambana
- Zhong Yuan Festival

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